

“Visions, Versions, and Deeds of Creek Sovereignty in Coosaponakeesa’s Legal Writings”

Coosaponakeesa (ca. 1700-1764) was an eighteenth-century Native American diplomat also known as Mary Musgrove, Mary Mathews, and Mary Bosomworth.<sup>1</sup> She spent her first years with her maternal Muscogee Creek kin in what is now the southeastern U.S. before moving to colonial Carolina to live with her white father, who was a deerskin trader. While with him, she received an education in English language reading and writing as well as arithmetic and Protestant Christian principles. When British colonists arrived in 1733 to establish Georgia, Coosaponakeesa and her first husband awaited them at their trading post on a bluff overlooking the site of the first settlement, Savannah. She played an essential role in Native-Georgia relations during the colony’s early decades. Besides interpreting for the British with the local Yamacraw Indians and the larger, more powerful Native nation nearby, the Creek Confederacy, she ran a series of trading posts and plantations alongside a succession of three husbands, assisted during trade and land negotiations, and helped enlist Creek military support for British struggles with other Indian nations and European powers in the region. As a result and counter to her ambitions, she incurred significant debt and loss of property. Acknowledging her national service, certain Creek micos, or chiefs, ceded to her three coastal islands. In contrast, despite (or perhaps because of) their initial dependence upon this Creek woman, Georgia’s British leaders refused her petitions for financial recompense and for recognition of her claims to the coastal islands until the last years of her life, when Governor Henry Ellis completed a legal document called an indenture, affirming her rights to the coastal island St. Catharine’s and paying her to relinquish

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<sup>1</sup> Coosaponakeesa began signing documents with this name in the 1740s. As it was her last consistently chosen name, I use it throughout to avoid confusion. Her given English name was Mary and the varying English last names are those of her husbands.

her claims upon two other islands. The digital image provided here is of a testament included with a manuscript copy of the indenture. In the eighteenth century, copying documents by hand was a common and necessary way to preserve, collect, and circulate content, especially for legal and governmental purposes. Also included on this site are transcriptions of three supplementary items, discussed below.

Because she leveraged alphabetic writing and multi-language speech as well as journeys, clothing, and spectacle, creating and interpreting her publication practice—then and now—demands a range of interwoven cultural, material, and linguistic literacies. In other words, understanding her practice also entails considering hidden literacies. For much of her life, Coosaponakeesa deftly engaged in a multimedia and embodied publication practice that shaped the trans-national Creek-Georgian-Yamacraw neighborhood located in what today constitutes parts of Georgia, Alabama, and South Carolina. This testament, which is one of the final extant documents authored by her as she died several years later, emblemizes this practice. The remainder of this essay limns some of those literacies and concludes by discussing how doing so helps trace a longer history of Creek reading and writing.

This testament is an ideal point at which to begin because its brevity, bureaucratic formality, and adherence to British legal principles do just that: hide the complex and evolving literacies that resulted in what amounts to her victory, though perhaps a pyrrhic one, in at last receiving colonial affirmation of her claims' validity. Here is a complete transcription:

I Mary the wife of the within named Tho.<sup>s</sup> [Thomas] Bosomworth do declare, that I have freely and without any compulsion, signed, Sealed & delivered, the within Instrument of writing passed between the said Thomas Bosomworth and me the said Mary on the one part, and his excellency Henry Ellis Esq.<sup>r</sup> [Esquire] of the

other part, and I do declare and renounce all title or claim of Dower that I might claim or be intitled to, after the Death of my said Husband to or out of the Lands or Hereditaments<sup>2</sup> hereby conveyed In Witness where of I have here unto set my hand & Seal the day & year first within written

Mary Bosomworth [mark]

These succinct lines are the only moment of the multi-page manuscript in which Coosaponakeesa speaks in the first person and without her husband, yet this moment also effectually silences her voice. Note that Coosaponakeesa begins this testament by identifying herself as “Mary the wife . . . of Tho.<sup>s</sup> Bosomworth.” Her self-identification mirrors other moments in the manuscript, which repeatedly refers to Thomas Bosomworth and “Mary his wife.” Bosomworth, her third husband, was an Englishman and lapsed Anglican minister who had arrived in Georgia in 1741. He was reviled by colonial leaders as an opportunist. The indenture attaches Coosaponakeesa’s identity to her husband’s in a clear effort to place her under coverture, the English common law principle whereby wives were assumed to be covered by their husbands legally, economically, and politically. Their identities were extensions of their husbands’, which is one reason why Coosaponakeesa’s name reverts to her English married one. After her adoption of the indenture’s coverture rhetoric, Coosaponakeesa then accedes to the agreement and also “renounce[s] all title or claim of Dower” that she might otherwise have made upon the death of her husband. Like coverture and taking the last name of one’s husband, dower is a British legal principle, not a Creek one. In the Native Southeast, Indigenous communities were typically matrilineal and matriarchal, with inheritances and genealogies accorded through women’s lineages. A Creek widow would not need to assert her dower rights to house and land

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<sup>2</sup> Hereditaments: items of property, including land, building, rights of way, and rents

because such property was hers and her clan's in the first place. By renouncing such prerogatives, Coosaponakeesa also implicitly consents to English common law; British rather than Creek principles govern her legal identity. This testament implies, therefore, just like the indenture as a whole, that her ties to the coastal islands are covered by and due to her partnership and relationship with her husband, not vice versa.

In subsuming Coosaponakeesa's identity to her husband's, the indenture disciplines and hides the literacies that resulted in this agreement. For almost fifteen years, Coosaponakeesa had been petitioning Georgian leaders for money, for recognition of her island property rights, and for appreciation of her status as diplomat and agent of the Creek nation. She had been accompanying her petitions with memorials, or narrative documents laying out the facts and justifications; three of those memorials have been included on this site as supplementary texts. Her rights and status, moreover, were the result of Creek leaders appreciating her (not her husband) as a Creek woman and leader whose contributions had been of signal importance to her nation. They affirmed this decision orally and in signed documents. Thus, in actuality, the validity and power of her claims were instead attributable to her Creek maternal inheritance, her service to the Creek Confederacy, and to various documents wherein Creek leaders averred that they ceded these islands to her. Governor Ellis was acquiescing to her active campaign, not the merit of her husband's entitlements.

Coosaponakeesa's campaign relied on a web of literacies. Hilary Wyss's 2012 book *English Letters and Indian Literacies* provides a schema to begin tracing them. In her introduction, Wyss distinguishes between Readerly Indians and Writerly Indians. In early America, Christian missionaries sought to produce "Readerly Indians"—i.e. ones who could read but not write—because this form of literacy was expected to keep Native students "docile [and]

passive.” “By emphasizing the teaching of reading rather than writing,” Wyss explains, “missionaries could speak for Natives even as they assured benefactors of the success of their proselytizing” (6). Because reading does not require extensive technologies of literacy—paper, ink, pens, flat surfaces—missionaries often had a lot of control over the scope of their pupils’ literacy. But as these Readerly Indians acquired the ability to write alphabetically in English, missionaries “lost control”: “The figure of the ‘Writerly Indian’ emerges not only as a speaker and actor fluent in the cultures and conventions of colonial society but also one fully committed to Native community as an ongoing political and cultural concern” (6). In this formulation reading literacy precedes and accompanies writing literacy. The transition at first appears also to be one from passive reader to active writer, but the reading that precedes writing on behalf of one’s community and its future is also active as it involves perception, understanding, and interpretation. Wyss’s formulation is useful for considering the hidden literacies signaled by the testament and the three supplementary memorials because it draws attention to how Coosaponakeesa actively perceives, understands, interprets, *and* writes. And then repeats and revises the process until she achieves her ends. Comparing her memorials elucidates her process. The three included here were written over the span of a little less than a decade. They are similar in terms of content and structure, but they are also distinctly different, both because they address different audiences and have different objectives and because she adjusts the rhetoric. They indicate where there is continuity in her reading and writing and how her narrative and argument shift as her perceptions and interpretations evolve.

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One literacy that Coosaponakeesa reads and then writes with over the course of the memorials is what it means to be a sovereign nation with “natural rights” in the colonial

Southeast's dynamic trans-national space. In 1747, she notes that "her Ancestors, Tho under the Appellation of Savages, or Barbarions, were a brave and free born people, who never owed Allegiance, to or Acknowledged the sovereignty of any Crowned Head whatever, but have always maintained their own Possessions and Independency, Against all Opposers by Warr, at the Expence of their Blood; as they Can shew by the many Trophies of Victory, and Relicts of their Enimies slain in Defence of their Natural Rights." Similarly, the 1754 memorial insists on the Creek Nation's eternal "Independency," in both the portion attributed to her and the portion attributed to Creek micos, but almost certainly written by her in her role as their agent and translator. Finally, in 1755, she adds language that indicates the present Creek peoples are the "Successors (Collectively) and Natural born Heirs" to the Creeks of the past. In statements like these, Coosaponakeesa perceives British principles of sovereignty as permitting alliance with but not allegiance to another nation and Crown. Her Creek ancestors were and contemporaries are free and independent and "maintain their own Possessions," a formulation that aligns citizenship with personal status and property rights; this citizenship was endowed by God, confirmed and protected through blood and sacrifice, and continuously passed on to each successive generation in an unbroken genealogy. All of this history is at the root of Creek "natural rights." Moreover, because elsewhere she links her inheritance and authority to her Creek kin, she also links Creek sovereignty to women's lineages. Her marriage to Bosomworth specifically and British legal principles generally covers and replaces neither her nor Creek rights. Coosaponakeesa *reads* British sovereignty and then *writes* a Creek version into these memorials.

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What purposes Coosaponakeesa's formulation of Creek sovereignty serves, however, varies with each memorial. In 1747, it is part of her own personal history and part of the

narrative she tells of Georgian-Creek relations. Creek sovereignty is a threat, because all or part of the confederacy may shift its alliances. Therefore, her memorial implies, Coosaponakeesa should be repaid for all the expenses she has incurred in her role as diplomat so as to maintain nation-to-nation goodwill and support. As time passes, however, she presents herself as the embodiment of Creek sovereignty, its representative and monarch. By 1754, she follows her testament of Creek sovereignty with the claim that the “Laws of God and Nature have ordained Me Head” of the Creek Nations. By 1755, it is not indirect laws but “God and Nature” themselves that have made her “Head.” Coosaponakeesa, the memorial asserts, is a sovereign head of a sovereign state by divine and natural rights (she even appears to use a royal we). To “Derogate[e]” her “honour & dignity” is despotism and against “the most sacred Law of Nature and Nations.” In short, by 1755, Coosaponakeesa suggests that British mistreatment of her is an affront to sovereignty generally. Colonial administrators are undermining their own principles and, by extension, their own sovereignty.

There are other such examples in the memorials and, like this one, they indicate that Coosaponakeesa’s literacies are both Readerly and Writerly. She actively perceives, understands, and interprets British political principles and diplomatic rhetoric, and rewrites them through a Creek context and into written texts. Moreover, this process evolves situationally and as she perceives, understands, and interprets more. The 1760 testament, nested within an indenture, hides these flexible and supple literacies and casts her instead as merely a wife covered by her husband and whose reading literacy is passive and whose writing literacy may simply copy what an Englishman—her husband, her governor—has placed in front of her.

In the case of Coosaponakeesa’s writings, the kinds of literacies that have been hidden include ones in addition to the ability to read or write English or any other alphabetic script on

paper. She must also read and write personal and diplomatic relationships, political and legal principles, and cultural values. What, then, are her technologies of literacy? What tools, supplies, and circumstances did Coosaponakeesa use to read and write these memorials and press her case? That same opening statement—"I Mary the wife . . . of Tho.<sup>s</sup> Bosomworth"—helps answer this question because even as it hides her literacies, it also signals her pragmatic willingness and skilled determination to convert her connections. A review of the three memorials reveals multiple moments where she leverages personal and communal relationships not only rhetorically but materially. This is no more clear than in the 1754 memorial, which also includes a copy of a 1750 document wherein seven Creek leaders grant Coosaponakeesa "full power and Authority to Say, Do, Act, Transact, Determine, Accomplish, and Finish, all Matters and Things" on their behalf and on behalf of the "Whole Nation." To strengthen her claims, she has gathered a collection of leaders' signatures and used that collection to write herself as a new leader of her nation. Indeed, it is around this time in her life that she begins to call herself Coosaponakeesa, or Coosa Language Bearer, where Coosa refers to a river as well as a multi-village member of the Creek Confederacy. For her, Creek leadership in the eighteenth-century colonial southeast requires more than wisdom, oratorical aptitude, or military prowess; it requires being able to assemble and hold the language.

When it comes to early American literatures, uncovering hidden literacies requires more capacious approaches to reading and writing and asking different questions about what the technologies of literacy are. In this instance, doing so not only shows how the first Native readers and writers in English were interweaving new linguistic skills with other models of communication, narrative, and publication, but also may produce connections to contemporary Native authors. Perhaps they too are interweaving multiple literacies, including tribally specific



ones, in order to produce English-language texts. How contemporary Native authors understand literacy, reading, and writing may even offer insights with which to return to earlier works. To those ends, the poem “Coosa” by Jennifer Elise Foerster, a contemporary poet of German, Dutch, and Mvskoke descent and a member of the Mvskoke (Creek) Nation of Oklahoma, offers a tantalizing comparison, in part because its title evokes Coosaponakeesa’s name as well as a Creek place. Rather than offer an interpretation, this essay concludes by following the excerpt with several additional questions that Foerster’s poem helps us ask about Coosaponakeesa’s hidden literacies. Here is an excerpt:

In the last days of my marriage to god,  
I wandered his spiraled library  
to read in the dark blank imprints of trees.  
Relentless navigation through the stacks  
of shell-tempered mortuary offerings,  
sandstone saws recovered from the caves.  
I lingered on the stairs of the convent  
to write these things, to recollect myself.  
Around midnight the mountains returned.  
The clouds dispersed into semicolons  
and I with them, into a new language,  
its boat temporary, invisible.  
I knew I would be traveling like this  
for centuries. This was my first attempt  
at vanishing. I would return before

anyone noticed poems to be found  
in the forest, not the mind.  
There's a canyon between this version of me  
and the shadow in the corner that is mine.  
I wear this canyon like a blank eye.

This excerpt, written in the first person, presents a figure reading, writing, and moving within a space that is both natural and constructed, perhaps by “god.” For Foerster and Coosaponakeesa, how does place function as a source of literacies? How might place be read? How might place be written? What role does memory play? In what ways are Coosaponakeesa’s texts imaginative and poetic? In what ways is Foerster’s poem diplomatic and political? In what ways are they part of the same Creek tradition of hidden literacies?

### **Works Cited**

Foerster, Jennifer Elise. From “Coosa.” *Poetry* 212.3 (June 2018).

Wyss, Hilary. *English Letters and Indian Literacies: Reading, Writing, and New England Missionary Schools, 1750-1830*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012.

### **Sources**

There are many works of scholarship about Coosaponakeesa as an historical figure, the most complete and recent of which is Steven C. Hahn’s *The Life and Times of Mary Musgrove* (University Press of Florida, 2012). For an examination of her as an author, see Chapter 1 in my book *In the Neighborhood: Women’s Publication in Early America* (University of Massachusetts

Press, 2016). The multi-volume series *Colonial Records of Georgia* (Atlanta, 1904-) contains transcriptions of many documents by and about Coosaponakeesa, including the memorials. Craig Womack's *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism* (University of Minnesota Press, 1999) is a groundbreaking book-length study of Creek literature, though it does not discuss Coosaponakeesa. The introduction to Lisa Brooks' *The Common Pot: The Recovery of Native Space in the Northeast* (University of Minnesota Press, 2008) offers an influential conception of the roots of Native writing and literature in early America. For more an audio recording of an excerpt of Jennifer Elise Foerster's "Coosa," go to <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/146714/from-coosa>. Another example of a poem related to Coosaponakeesa is Rayna Green's "Coosaponakeesa (Mary Mathews Musgrove Bosomworth), Leader of the Creeks, 1700-1783" (1984). Green, who is Cherokee, dedicates her poem to her friend, the Creek poet Joy Harjo. To read Green's poem as well as work by Harjo, see Green's edited anthology *That's What She Said: Contemporary Poetry and Fiction by Native American Women* (Indiana University Press, 1984).